

"McNEAL HOUSE"
Hardeman County
Bolivar, Tennessee

HABS No. TENN-10

HABS
TENN
35-BOL,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Tennessee

Historic American Buildings Survey
J. Frazer Smith, District Officer
W. Jeter Eason, Deputy District Officer
404 Goodwyn Institute Building,
Memphis, Tennessee.

APPENDIX

"The Col. McNeal House"
Bolivar, Hardeman County, Tennessee

Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Thomas R. Smith, 1935
Mrs. James Walter McDonnell, 1962
One Cherokee Drive, Memphis 11, Tennessee

Date of Erection: In 1962 Mr. W. Jeter Eason, AIA, author of these notes, forwarded information from the present owner fixing more accurately a building date for the house than was hitherto available. Mrs. McDonnell's recollections taken from family memoirs and replete with human interest and the vagaries of war, are a fitting part of the story of the house. The centennial anniversary of the Civil War and some of these happenings, is therefore a most appropriate time to subjoin the following anecdotes:

"I know that I am right about the date because Bolivar was over-run by Union soldiers from the first. These are some of the tales that were told to me: Major McNeal's only daughter died in 1854. His wife was so inconsolable that he hoped to divert her by building a house as close to the cemetery as possible. The house was started in 1858. When the war started in 1861, there was about two months work left to finish up. Major McNeal convinced the architect that, if he would stay and supervise the completion, he would get him a safe-conduct through the Confederate lines, back to Chicago. He did.

"In March 1862, Mrs. McNeal was awakened one morning by a great commotion on the front lawn. She found a company of Union Cavalry in the front yard with horses tied to the grill work. She asked the men to please move them and they laughed at her. In a minute the Captain rode up. It was the architect, and he got the horses away before any damage was done.

"That same March, Major McNeal wrote General Grant complaining of the conduct of the Union officer in charge. General Grant sent word that he would be in Bolivar on a certain day and would have breakfast with him. He and his staff ate breakfast in that dining room. It turned out that he was there to review the troops before the battle of Shiloh. My grandmother, aged 17, sat on the west porch and heard the guns from that battle. Her 18 year old brother was fighting in it. All this happened in the spring of 1862 and the house was finished."

Architect: Unknown

Builder: Major (later elevated to Colonel) Ezekial Polk McNeal

Present Condition: Due to the fact that the house has remained in the family and that the family has retained its financial status the house is in a very good state of repair and is the source of much pride on the part of the present owners. They have preserved all of the furnishings, furniture, murals, mirrors, etc. that were possible to save. There have been no major changes on the interior and no change whatsoever on the exterior unless replacements can be called changes. Electric wiring, plumbing in the bath room have been added to the interior, but no exposed wiring or plumbing exists. The first floor, consequently, is to all appearances exactly as built. The second floor has undergone such changes as were necessary to add baths. The gardens and outhouses are virtually the same as originally planned with the exception that certain parts of the flower gardens have been turned over to vegetables and some of the little paths through the grounds have not been retained, most however, have.

Number of Stories: The major section of the house is two stories with cellar and attic which was originally a Ball Room. The service portion of the house is one story, but is now used only as living quarters for certain of the domestic servants.

Materials of Construction: The foundations are built of brick and stone. Exterior walls solid brick. Major interior partitions solid brick. Certain minor partitions are wood. The flooring is made of heart cedar laid on hand hewn joists and sills and covered from corner to corner with rich carpeting. Crystal chandeliers throughout the house have been adapted for electricity. The mantels as shown in the accompanying photographs are of Carara Marble imported from Italy and are exquisite examples of same. The cast iron porches were cast in Spain. Exterior woodwork in many cases is Cherry. Interior plastered walls hand painted throughout the down stairs section and in the hall and certain rooms on the second floor. This painting was done to emulate paneling and cornices in such a careful manner that it is only noticeable after careful and close observation that what appears to be cornices and panels are really paint. Panels decorated in floral designs and the colors are still quite intense.

Other Existing Records: Unless there are records about which I have not heard, there are no other records available other than a few papers in the possession of the family. For reasons unknown the house was not included by the Garden Study Club of Nashville in their publication of "The History of Homes and Gardens of Tennessee".

Additional Data: So far as actually participating in the developments of that particular part of Tennessee this house did not occupy a position of destiny. It was built as a home by a wealthy man, Col. McNeal, a descendent of Ezekiel Polk who was the grandfather of James K. Polk, a one time President of the United States. It was, and still is, a show place in that part of the country, and is an excellent example of that period of architectural development which cannot be typed except by date. It is not typical of the plantation manor houses having as their predominating characteristic classic columns. It came at a time prior to that decadence period after the Civil War and just before the "Jig Saws" architecture resulted from the Mississippi River boat detail. Neither is it a compact town house porchless type of the early 1800's. Just what its architecture is, is hard to say, but it is lovely and a monument to excellent craftsmanship and beauty. ~~ITALIAN VILLA~~

Prepared by W. Jeter Eason, 1935
Reedited by Worth Bailey, HABS Historian, 1962
to incorporate additional information.

Approved by


Acting Chief Architect

Date January 4, 1963

Addendum to:

McNeal House
Union and Bills Streets
Bolivar
Hardeman County
Tennessee

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Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO:

MCNEAL HOUSE

HABS No. TN-10

Location: Union and Bills Streets, Bolivar, Hardeman County,
Tennessee.

Present Owner
and Occupant: Mrs. James Walter McDonnell, 1 Cherokee Drive, Memphis,
Tennessee.

Present Use: Part-time residence.

Significance: This Italianate mansion was built circa 1861-62 for Major
Ezekial Polk McNeal's bereaved wife, whose only child died
in 1854. Major McNeal was a cousin of President James
Knox Polk. The house was designed by a Union architect
from Chicago who stayed to complete the house after the
outbreak of the Civil War. The house contains some
interesting interior elements.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Circa 1861-62.
2. Architect: Unnamed Union architect from Chicago. (See also
Historical Context).
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following chain of title may
be established from the Deed and Will Books of Hardeman County.

1845 Deed February 12, 1845, recorded February 12, 1845 in
Book I page 109
J. J. Williams, trustee
to
Ezekiel Polk McNeal

1887 Will January 23, 1885, recorded January 4, 1887 in
Will Book 5 page 286
Ezekiel Polk McNeal
to
Albert T. McNeal (nephew)

1900 Trust Deed January 10, 1900, recorded January 11, 1900 in
Trust Deed Book 28 page 195
Albert T. McNeal
to
Jerome Hill

- 1900 Release of Equity of Redemption December, 1900, recorded
December 19, 1900 in
Book MM page 504
Albert T. McNeal
to
Jerome Hill
- 1900 Deed December 19, 1900, recorded November 1, 1901 in
Book NN page 359
Jerome Hill
to
Irene McNeal Hill (wife)
- 1922 Will May 10, 1921, recorded March 22, 1922 in
Will Book 6 page 349
Irene McNeal Hill
to
Mrs. Thomas R. Smith, Mrs. R. G. Morrow (daughters)
and Irene McNeal Bond (granddaughter)
- 1959 Will April 17, 1953, recorded September 26, 1959 in
Will Book 9 page 206
Irene (McNeal) Bond Smith
to
Thomas R. Smith, Jr. and Kate Smith Orgill (children)
- 1960 Deed July 5, 1960, recorded December 30, 1960 in
Book A4 page 221
Joseph Orgill, Kate Smith Orgill, and Thomas R. Smith, Jr.
to
Irene Bond McDonnell

- B. Historical Context: Major Ezekiel Polk McNeal, who had the mansion built, was one of the earliest settlers of Hardeman County, having arrived there in 1822 with his father, uncle, and grandfather Polk. When the county was organized in 1823 its court first met on land of his father, Thomas McNeal; later the town of Bolivar was established on higher ground, originally owned by Ezekiel Polk (his grandfather). In addition to founding a dynasty with such grandsons as Major Ezekiel Polk McNeal and President James K. Polk, Ezekiel Polk should be remembered for writing one of the classic epitaphs of American cultural history. Ezekiel Polk died thirty years before this house was begun, but his grave is just across the road from it and the Polk Cemetery as a whole should not be overlooked. This is Colonel Ezekiel Polk's epitaph, "written by himself in the 74th year of his age."

Here lies the dust of old E. P.
One instance of mortality;
Pennsylvania born. Car'lina bred.
In Tennessee died on his bed.
His youthful days he spent in pleasure,
His latter days in gath'ring treasure;
From superstition lived quite free,
And practiced strict morality;
To holy cheats he was not willing
To give one solitary shilling;
He can foresee, and for foreseeing
He equals most of men in being,
That Church and State will join their pow'r
And mis'ry on this country show'r;
And Methodists with their camp bawling,
Will be the cause of this downfalling;
An era not destined to see,
It waits for poor posterity.
First fruits and tithes are odious things,
And so are Bishops, Priests and Kings.

Family tradition states that Major Ezekiel Polk McNeal located his mansion where it is because of his wife, despondent over the loss of thier only child (Priscilla, who died July 16, 1854 at the age of eighteen), wanted to live as near the Polk Cemetery as possible. This story may be supported by the eastward orientation of the mansion (rear elevation, leading to the cemetery); the several other old houses in this section of town face northward, toward the public square. A number of very fine monuments grace the Polk Cemetery; several, including those of Ezekiel Polk McNeal and his daughter, are by L. H. and J. B. Fuller, St. Louis.

McNeal family tradition has preserved another story which may shed light on the architect's identity. The architect was said to be from Chicago, and a member of some military unit there. When Fort Sumter was fired upon (April, 1861) the interior of the McNeal house had not been finished, but the architect wanted to get back to his unit while travel was possible. Major McNeal assured him a safe conduct pass so that he could stay in Bolivar long enough to supervise completion of the house.

Bolivar was occupied by Union troops almost from the beginning of the war. Battles was fought around it, but no great damage was done to the town by either army; orders and reports by commanders on both sides indicate that it was spared by design, not by chance. At one point in the occupation, so the story goes, a Federal Cavalry unit was billeted on the grounds of the McNeal house. The troops were becoming boisterious, and some hitched their horses to the ornate cast-iron

porch balustrade. Major McNeal's wife came out and requested them to tie the horses to hitching posts or trees, as the cast-iron might break off. When they refused, the officer of the day was summoned. He proved to be the architect who had designed the house, and rather emphatically supported Mrs. McNeal's request. The mansion was not subsequently threatened.

This story is supported by the fact that at least three mounted units from Illinois operated in the Bolivar area during the war. The following list of officers known to have been in Bolivar may contain the name of the architect from Chicago:

August 30, 1862: 11th Illinois Cavalry, Major S. D. Puterbaugh and Captain Otto Funke. 2nd Illinois Cavalry, Colonel Harvey Hogg (killed) and Captain M. H. Musser.

September 22, 1862: 2nd Illinois Cavalry, Colonel Silas Noble, Major John J. Mudd, Captain Higgins, Captain Jones, Captain Fullerton, and Captain Vieregg; attached artillery, Captain Mann.

December 23, 1862: 6th Illinois Cavalry, Major Reuben Loomis, Captain Lynch, Lieutenant Wilson and Lieutenant Charlesworth; attached artillery, Lieutenant Curtis.

March 21, 1863: 6th Illinois Cavalry, Captain Sloan and Captain Pierce.

The McNeal mansion was also visited by General Ulysses S. Grant a short time before the Battle of Shiloh; the General aided Major McNeal in recovering a large sum of money which the Federal Quartermaster, through some sort of military pressure and personal extortion, had exacted from McNeal and had kept for himself.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Italianate elements and the ornate cast-iron west porches are the most notable exterior features of the house. Notable interior features include wood work, trim, wall and ceiling paintings and fireplaces.
2. Condition of fabric: The house is generally in good condition, although there is superficial deterioration, primarily in roof leaks and wood work.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The measurements are approximately 48' north to south; 69' east to west; 30' to cornice. The house is two stories high, and its plan is L-shaped.
2. Foundations: Brick.
3. Walls: The walls are finished with stucco and scored to resemble cut stone; they are cream colored. There is a 3'-10" high water course.
4. Structural system, framing: The house has brick bearing walls 22" thick on the exterior and 10" thick for major interior partitions. The walls support wood timbers.
5. Porches: There is a wood and decorative cast-iron porch on the west (front) side of the house. It extends the full width of the facade on the first floor but is contained only at the center of the upper level.

There is also a small wood porch on the north side. It is L-shaped in plan. It Ionic columns are 14 1/2" diameter and 12'-1" high. On the south is a partially enclosed wood porch; it is enclosed with large double-hung windows (12/12 ligths) in two of the five bays. Below the porch is a hot house, built out from the porch in the basement.

In the southeast corner are frame constructions forming lath porches.

6. Chimneys: There are six brick and stucco chimneys on the house; they are at exterior walls on the north and south walls and near the southeast corner.
7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There are two major entryways. The one on the north is located at the Ionic porch. It has a single door with a fanlight and is set within an arched opening.

The west entry doorway has a double door with fanlight transom set in a rectangular recess which is a shuttered enclosure. Each door is 2'-4 1/2" x 8'-0".

There is a service door at the eastern end of the northeast wing.

- b. Windows, shutters: Wood double-hung windows on the first floor measure 3'-9" x 10'-7" and have 4/6 lights and 11" wood surrounds. The windows extend down to the floor level. Some first floor windows are arched head, primarily on the north elevation.

Second floor windows are double-hung with 4/4 sash and surrounds. They are flat headed with heavy cornices.

Louvered shutters are used on most windows.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The building has a low hip roof with a raised seam sheet metal surface.
- b. Cornice: There is a box cornice with dentil blocks.
- c. Cupola: There is a 10' square cupola on the roof. It has two arched windows on each side (double-hung, 4/4), pilasters at the corners and a bracketed cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The overall plan of the building is L-shaped with the two long sides on the north and west. The individual floor plans are similar because the major partitions are of brick. The west block of the plan has a central hall flanked by two rooms on the north and south. The central hall (containing a stairway) turns into a hall (also containing a stairway) extending south from the north entrance. To the east of this second hall is the dining room with the pantry beyond to the east. The kitchen was in the building directly to the east of the house. The basement and second floors reflect this main level in layout. There are five chambers on the second floor.
- 2. Stairways: There are two stairways, one in each of the halls. That in the west hall is 3'-8 1/2" wide with 7" risers and 13" treads. There are twenty-five risers. The stringers have cut scrollwork. The turned newel post is paneled, and there are two turned balusters per tread. The secondary stairway is in the north hall and has twenty-four risers of 7 1/2" with 12 1/2" x 2'-10" treads. It has a plain turned newel post and turned balusters (two per tread). There are twenty-seven risers of 8" (nine 3/4" x 2'-4 1/2" treads) between the second floor and tower.
- 3. Flooring: The floors are of 5" wood boards; there is an 11" base molding. The basement floor is a concrete slab.

4. Walls and ceilings: Plaster. The west hall has a fresco ceiling painted with medallions. The dining room walls have oil paintings. There are cove ceilings in the first floor rooms and the parlor in the southwest corner of the house has a cove ceiling painted to resemble cornice molding. It also has a fresco ceiling.

Ceiling heights: Basement, 9'-6"; first floor, 14'-0"; second floor, 13'-0".

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The interior doors measure 3'-2" x 10'-4" x 2" and have arched heads. The five-panel doors and the 9" door surrounds have false oak grain applied. The twin parlors on the south side have sliding doors between. The doorway is 9'-3" x 11'-8" high. It also has the false oak grain applied.

6. Decorative features and trim: The house contains many notable interior elements. The west hall ceiling has a fresco and the dining room walls have oil paintings. The doors have artificial graining. There are wood trim and plasterwork. The fireplaces are of Carara marble and have oval openings and coal grates. (See also Walls and Ceilings and Openings above).

7. Hardware: Glass knobs and lock covers.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is situated on a large lot on the southeast corner of Union and Bills Streets; it is set back about 150' from Union on the east and the same from Bills on the north. Many large trees provide shade for the property, and tall shrubs are planted on the street sides. There are brick paths in the gardens.
2. Outbuildings: There are several outbuildings extant including a pumphouse, wash house (elongated octagon in plan), kitchen and cook's building, smokehouse, gazebo and few brick servants' houses. The brick kitchen to the east of the house is 16' x 24' with two rooms and a basement. It and the other quarters (similar in detail and size) have gable roofs. These service buildings are generally located to the southeast of the main house.

No longer extant are the ice house, stables and barn.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Interview: Mrs. Irene Bond McDonnell, October 4, 1972.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Speer, William S., comp. Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans.
Nashville: Albert B. Tavel, 1888, pp. 160-1.

Prepared by: Richard H. Hulan
HABS Project Historian
Summer 1972

Robert C. Giebner
HABS Project Supervisor
Summer 1972

Edited by: Susan McCown
HABS Historian
Spring 1985

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1972 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the West Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, and Richard H. Hulan, project historian (Nashville) at the Memphis, Tennessee field office on the campus of Memphis State University.

The photographs were taken in Spring of 1974 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer.

The written data was edited in Spring of 1985 by Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, for transmittal to the Library of Congress.